

Unsuccessful Churches:

BY

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OF

Yarmouth, N. S.

*The Circular Letter of the Nova Scotia Western
Baptist Association, held at Liverpool, N. S.,
June 16th, 1877, to the Churches of
which it is composed.*



HALIFAX, N. S.
MESSENGER PRINTING OFFICE,
1877.

Memorial Committee

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Yarmouth, N.S.

The Circular Letter of the Nova Scotia
Episcopal Association, dated at Yarmouth, N.S.,
June 18th 1877, to the Churches of
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HAROLD N. S.
MEMORIAL COMMITTEE OF THE
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UNSUCCESSFUL CHURCHES.

THE CIRCULAR LETTER OF THE NOVA SCOTIA WESTERN BAPTIST ASSOCIATION TO THE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCHES OF WHICH IT IS COMPOSED.

Dear Brethren,—

The original design of our annual Circular Letter was, we presume, to convey to the members of our churches not only expressions of fraternal greeting and kindly encouragement but also thoughts and suggestions of a practical character in relation to matters that are of present and vital importance to our Denomination. With this end in view the topic under consideration has been selected.

At such a time as this it is proper for us to enquire whether all the churches belonging to our Association have been successful in their evangelical efforts during the past year; and, if they have not, what has been the cause of their failure? It might fairly be assumed at the outset that the specific purpose for which Christ has called his churches into existence on earth is generally understood by intelligent believers. And yet this assumption may be altogether too favorable and flattering to ourselves. It is, indeed, quite possible that many, even in the ranks of Baptist church-members need more definite and correct views than they now entertain as to the primary object for which the Master has called them into his service. It is surely unnecessary to say that this object was not simply to secure for us an hour's entertainment in the sanctuary a certain number of times during the week, in listening to the best musical and literary performances at the least possible expense, such as men are accustomed to expect at a theatre or place of public amusement. It is feared, however, that not a few professors of religion have no higher idea of church-membership than is here implied. How completely is this at variance with the scriptural idea! According to the New Testament model we are not expected to take into consideration for one moment our own comfort or convenience in our relationship to the church, and our labors for the promotion of our Savior's kingdom. The very pledge with which we enter upon our spiritual career is that we shall "not henceforth live unto ourselves, but unto Him who died for us and rose again." The grand purpose in view of which the christian church was constituted is concisely and explicitly stated by Paul in his brief pastoral letter to Titus, in which it is affirmed of our blessed Redeemer that he "gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." From this statement we learn that the constituent elements of true religion are personal holiness and spiritual activity.

Such of our churches as earnestly strive to conform to the scrip-

tural pattern here indicated are faithfully fulfilling the obligations imposed upon them by their glorious Founder. And we have reason to be profoundly grateful to God that there are not wanting worthy examples of this kind. But how few, alas! can claim to have attained to this exalted position! A much larger proportion have abundant cause for lamentation over their leanness, their lack of success and their alarming retrogression. The care of these churches demands our careful study and our earnest prayers.

In explaining the inactivity and spiritual darkness which unhappily prevail in too many christian communities, it has been heretofore the almost invariable custom among us to sum up all our ecclesiastical failures under the heading of "unsuccessful ministers." There have been doubtless just grounds in too many instances for adopting this method of explanation. It may, nevertheless, be both wise and profitable to consider whether an equally satisfactory and reasonable solution of the problem may not possibly be found under the heading of *Unsuccessful Churches*. The suggestion is perfectly orthodox. In turning over the pages of the New Testament we are not a little surprised to observe that whilst bishops and elders are seldom or never reprov'd for unfaithfulness, the churches are often brought to task on account of their lack of zeal, declension from "first love," worldliness, etc. This is noticeable chiefly from the fact that it stands out in such striking contrast with the modern custom of loading our ministers with blame and sending scores of them adrift annually on account of failures for which the churches themselves are largely if not wholly responsible. We shall not claim either that ministers are now as faithful as they were in apostolic times, or that the churches of the nineteenth century are as prone to apostasy as were their primitive predecessors; but it is quite evident that there is enough similarity between the former and the latter days to give appropriateness and value to our present meditations.

THE FACT STATED.

That a large proportion of our churches are comparatively unsuccessful in accomplishing the work or exerting the salutary influence for which they were designed is painfully apparent. Viewed either in reference to the spirituality of their members, the efforts put forth by them in their respective localities, or the degree of aid they have rendered in the support of our denominational interests, it is obvious that success is oftener the exception than the rule. From the statistical returns which are forwarded annually to our Associations it appears that many of our churches have for a long time had no increase in their numbers. From the same source we find that many are giving either very little or absolutely nothing in the way of assisting the great enterprises for evangelizing and educating the world. Who among us was not surprised, astounded and humiliated when the statement appeared in the public prints over the signature of our Home Secretary of Foreign Missions that *one hundred and sixty Baptist Churches in the Maritime Provinces*

contributed not one cent during the past fiscal year for the purpose of carrying out the Master's sacred commission—"Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature"! A much larger number of churches have contributed nothing towards the promotion of home evangelization. As a necessary result of this lamentable inactivity and illiberality a sort of religious stagnation, a spiritual nightmare, supervenes, Sunday Schools are neglected and allowed to die out, pulpits become permanently vacant, the regular meetings for religious worship are gradually forsaken, until nothing remains but empty houses, a few stray, gaunt mice, and frowning spires pointing silently and ominously toward heaven admonishing the observer that a day of reckoning is at hand. Might not such churches with great propriety be kindly invited to resign their position and quietly step down and out under the charge of being unsuccessful?

THE CAUSES ASSIGNED.

It would be impossible to review, within the narrow limits of a brief circular, the various causes which tend to hinder the Lord's work among our churches. These causes are both numerous and complicated. We may, however, advert to a few of the more prominent ones.

There can be no doubt that the primary and controlling source of the evil under consideration is simply the lack of genuine spirituality. If our hearts are not right in the sight of God, our words and deeds will scarcely be found to harmonize with the teachings of inspired truth. Paul gave a satisfactory account of the motives by which he and his co-laborers were actuated in their zealous and self-sacrificing toils when he declared that "the love of Christ constraineth us." So long as men continue to pay more attention and a larger tribute of affection to their farms, their warehouses or their fishing smacks than to their God, they will persist, as in the days of Amos, in "sacrificing unto their net and burning incense unto their drag." A sense of the goodness and mercy of our heavenly Father must become so dominant in our minds as to subordinate all worldly considerations to the higher claims of our spiritual life before we shall be willing cheerfully to consecrate all our talents, our possessions and ourselves to His service.

The lack of brotherly love and especially of denominational love, so often apparent in our communities, are fruitful causes of spiritual inactivity and religious declension. When a man ceases to manifest true affection toward the members of the household of faith, when he takes no longer an honest pride in the welfare of the church with which he is providentially connected, or in the prosperity of the denomination to whose articles of faith and practice he has subscribed, it will make comparatively little difference to him how soon either that church or that denomination shall become extinct. The death and burial of either, will be an occasion of few tears and little grief.

The absence of success in our churches is often directly traceable

to the inadequacy with which pastors are sustained. This is true in relation to financial matters : but we allude more particularly to the moral support that is given to ministers. It is not infrequently the case that a pastor is called upon to bear the whole burden of a church both in its religious services and its business management. Instead of finding an Aaron and a Hur to uphold his trembling hands, he too often finds a Nadab and an Abihu offering strange fire and rendering nugatory what little influence for good he has endeavoured to exert. As a result of this, both the character and office of the christian minister are by many held in light esteem, and ministerial itineracy is becoming as common as that of the troubadours or minstrels of by-gone days who roamed about from place to place singing songs and telling stories for the purpose of obtaining their daily bread. It is not our intention in these remarks to exonerate pastors in the slightest degree from any blame of which they may be justly deserving ; but we aim to show that they are not entitled to a monopoly of that blame which is generally placed exclusively upon their shoulders.

THE REMEDY SUGGESTED

The speedy and entire removal of these causes of declension is the important and practical matter which demands our best wisdom and most earnest prayers.

How may a better state of things be brought about ?

The reply to this question has been to some extent anticipated by the foregoing considerations.

It is obvious that personal holiness must necessarily relieve our first attention. Unless our hearts are filled with love to Christ it will be folly to expect either enjoyment or success in our religious efforts. To how many churches and individuals might be addressed the withering rebuke : " I know thy works that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead ! " We need the constant presence and guiding influence of the Holy Spirit. Our sufficiency is of God, and nothing of permanent benefit or value can be accomplished without His gracious assistance. The voice of the Master is heard to-day uttering the solemn injunction to each of the churches : " Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works ; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."

It is also necessary that, as members of the church of Christ, we should have just conceptions of the duties and responsibilities which belong to this relationship. We are not called to a life of idleness, but to one of constant activity and self-sacrifice. The more clearly we understand the glorious mission of the church on earth, the more grateful we feel for the honor we have received in being permitted to participate in its blessings and share in its toils, and the more zealously we labor to secure its universal extension. Saved ourselves, the chief joy of our lives will be to become instrumental in the salvation of others. To this end our fervent prayers will often ascend

to God, our means will be cheerfully and liberally contributed, and no sacrifice will be thought too great in carrying on the Master's work. The emotions of our hearts will find appropriate expression in the familiar and beautiful words,—

"Were all the realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

In fine, we have need to offer constant and fervent prayer to our God that the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit may be graciously vouchsafed unto us. Enlightened and animated by that indwelling Spirit we shall form correct ideas of the character and magnitude of the work in which we are engaged, we shall have a just appreciation of the priceless value of immortal souls, and, above all, we shall have a sincere desire for the universal reign of our risen and glorified Lord. Under such influences no church can be unsuccessful, no pastor can labor in vain. The theme suggested for our Association by our esteemed brother in Christ, Deacon Samuel Brown, may well be adopted by each of the churches as a fitting and precious motto;—"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."